

Requirement to hold Interim Polling Review

Cabinet Member(s) Cllr. Tim Adams	District Ward(s) affected: Stody; Priory; Poppyland; Hoveton & Tunstead; Wells with Holkham; North Walsham West
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1. Introduction

Over the summer, the Electoral Services team has visited the designated polling stations across the district to assess their continued suitability ahead of the forthcoming 2023 Local Elections. This has been the first chance the current team has had to fulfil a visit to each site location to conduct such a review and on the whole it is reassuring to see that the locations we use for polling purposes are suitable, given the rurality of our district.

There is a need however to run an interim review under The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 and the Representation of the People Act 1982. This review is to act on the findings from these assessments and is only looking to make changes where existing arrangements are deemed to be unsuitable for a variety of reasons such as poor accessibility or condition of hire, comfort of staff or ongoing unavailability.

The proposed changes would be implemented from the District and Parish elections being held on Thursday 4th May 2023 if it is agreed that consultation on the proposed changes can proceed.

2. Polling Stations proposed for change

2.1 Thornage All Saints Church Vestry – Thornage (ST07)

Currently the parish of Thornage votes at the Vestry of All Saints Church and has done so for a number of years. Whilst there have never been any incidents at this polling station, staff have often stated that it is not a nice place to spend over 15 hours in on polling day.

On visiting the polling station it is apparent that there is very restricted parking, indeed if you have two members of staff in separate vehicles, there is room for only one other vehicle.

This parking is also some way from the church and is a walk across a poorly lit and uneven grass path through the graveyard. It is not suitable for anyone with mobility issues. Access from The Street is also stepped and is direct from the highway itself which provides a significant risk during hours of darkness and to those with poor mobility. At the top of

these steps it is too a winding grass pathway that leads to the Church which again is not ideal.

Access into the church itself is stepped and although there is a ramp it was quite heavy and didn't seem like it would be easy to move into position.

Inside the polling station itself there are now toilet and a small kitchenette area where a food could be heated and a hot drink made. The space inside where polling would take place was small and not well lit and would not provide comfortable working conditions, especially if the weather was not favourable. Extra lighting would need to be provided to provide sufficient light as would extra heaters, both of which would need to be carried the significant distance over the uneven path.

The proposal would be for electors from the parish of Thornage to attend Briningham Village Hall to conduct their vote. This location is 1.5 miles away from the current polling station and serves a parish which is in the same District Council ward. This polling station currently serves 73 polling station voters from Briningham and has the size and facilities to be able to accommodate the extra numbers from Thornage which on most recent figures would be 135 electors. There is ample space to park, but given the increased vehicle movements which this proposal would attract consideration would be given to requesting signage be placed on the corner of the entrance to the polling station on the B1110.

2.2 Overstrand Parish Hall – Overstrand (PO2)

There are concerns over the accessibility to the Parish Hall as it can only be accessed on foot down the Londs pathway from the High Street which is not good for any electors who may suffer from poor mobility. There is very limited parking available on the High Street and this also proves a concern for staff working at the station in that they need to safely transport their materials down the poorly lit passage late at night after the poll.

The entrance to the Parish hall could also provide a wheelchair user with difficulty as the turn into the doorway is quite sharp from the concrete ramp outside.

We are proposing the use of either The Belfry Centre on Cromer Road or The Pavilion at the Overstrand Sports Club but further visits to both venues are required ahead of any consultation.

2.3 Thursford Methodist Chapel – Thursford (PR7)

This proposal would be to trial the relocation of the polling place from the Methodist Chapel on Clarks Lane to St Andrews' which is accessed down the track to the Old Hall, off Heath Lane.

The Methodist chapel was on visiting seemed very damp and didn't appear to be in the best condition. The outside area was poorly lit and the pathway was covered in moss which could potentially be slippery if

wet although it does not appear hazardous other than that. There is a step up into the entrance which given the space it would be hard to position a suitable ramp.

The facilities were also very basic and dated in the hall in respect of staff comfort over a long day working at the polling station.

Parking close to the station is on the verge immediately outside the station with not much space once you consider parking will also be required nearby by the staff working here. This could then create a hazard at the junction of Clarks Lane and The Street/North Lane.

St Andrew's church, although slightly further outside of the main centre of the village is considered to be a better venue in terms of accessibility into the station, car parking and for voter comfort.

It should be mentioned that there have not been any complaints about the use of the Methodist Church however, given that St Andrews is quoted on its website as 'having built up a reputation as a community hub for the village' and it looks to have several events held there including film nights it would provide a better solution for parish polling going forward.

Should we receive a favourable response, we would re-designate the polling place for Thursford parish to St Andrews in the next full review of the district.

2.4 Hoveton Village Hall – Hoveton (HT4)

At the 2021 County Council and PCC election the Village Hall was unavailable due to it initially being used as a Covid Vaccination centre. The replacement station was at the Broadland Youth and Community Centre which is next door to the Village Hall on Stalham Road.

This proved to be a good alternative station with good access, facilities and parking arrangements.

The main driver for change here is the cost of hire, with Hoveton Village Hall asking for in excess of £1000 to hire the hall and all other associated rooms on the premises whereas the Youth and Community Centre are requesting £10 per hour (£160) for use of their hall.

2.5 The Victoria Resident's Lounge – Holkham (WH1)

Due to changes at The Victoria, The Resident's lounge is now used as an office and as such no longer available for use as a Polling Station. We have been offered use of a suite on the ground floor of The Ancient House which is a short distance across from The Victoria.

This too provides a suitable location on a par with the previous provision but with the benefit of level access for wheelchairs which the Residents Lounge did not have.

This proposal is that this location should be used on a trial basis for the forthcoming May 2023 elections with a view to being made permanent at the next full review.

2.6 Designated Polling Place for North Walsham North polling district (NWW2)

The St John’s Ambulance Hall on Bacton Road which is currently the designated polling place for the North Walsham North polling district, is no longer available for hire. Therefore we will take this opportunity to formally propose the venue at St Benet Church Hall, Vicarage Street as the designated polling station for this ward.

It was used at the May 2021 elections and no negative feedback was received. Although it is not located in the North Walsham North polling district, the lack of other suitable locations within the district means St Benets Hall provides a credible solution, and it is also situated in close proximity to the previous location at St John’s Ambulance Hall.

3. Conclusion

Having conducted a comprehensive review of the Polling Stations over the late spring and summer the Elections Team is satisfied that we are in the vast majority of places, using the best location available in each parish. It is not always easy in a rural district to provide the ‘model’ polling station but we have made suggestions where applicable on improvements which could be made which would improve the voter experience in terms of accessibility and comfort, which would also benefit our members of staff.

The proposed changes are seen as essential where the existing arrangements are not suitable, and in one case, unavailable, and the only alternative is a change of polling place.

4. Recommendation

The recommendation is that Full Council allow for the commencement of an Interim Polling Place review including consultation with the parishes/polling districts who are proposed for a change to their current arrangements.

A timetable for review is suggested as follows:

Stage	Action	Dates
Authorisation	Council resolve to undertake review	20 th December 2022
Commencement	Notice of Review published	On 21 st December 2022
Stage One	Initial Consultation with stakeholders – submissions invited from all interested parties	By 31 st January 2023
Stage Two	1. Publication and Consideration of submissions received 2. Final recommendations prepared.	By 10 th February 2023

Stage Three	Final recommendations to be considered and approved by Full Council.	Early Feb 2023 – date TBC
Completion	Publication of conclusions of review.	By 27 th February 2023
Adoption	Implementation of new polling arrangements if adopted	4 th May 2023

5. Implications and Risks

The implications of this are that some electors will have to travel further to cast their vote. All will be offered the opportunity to apply for an Absent Vote if they do not wish to visit their new polling station.

6. Financial Implications and Risks

None as such, however it is always the aim to strive for the best value for money where possible and this is evident in section 2.4 of this report.

7. Sustainability

There are no sustainability issues relating to this report

8. Equality and Diversity

Legislation requires all polling stations to be accessible for all people wishing to exercise the right to cast their vote in person. The District Council gives this issue detailed consideration in the planning and conduct of elections in the District. Regular reviewing of the buildings we use indicates a commitment in continuous improvement and giving the best experience for our electors when they visit their polling station.

9. Section 17 Crime and Disorder considerations

There are no considerations required in relation to this.